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DAYLIGHT SAVING IN ANCIENT ROME

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The ancient Romans labored under the enormous disadvantage of having no way of measuring small periods of time, as we have with our seconds, minutes, and hours. They divided their period of daylight into twelve periods of equal length which they called hours. These, of course, varied in length according to the time of year from about forty-five to seventy-five minutes. Think of trying to run railroad trains on such a system! But the system had great advantages as a compensation—the Romans were not confronted with the great problem of daylight saving. The various occupations of the day were arranged with reference to sunrise—a certain engagement might be made for the end of the third “hour” after sunrise. To illustrate the advantage of this plan let us take a concrete example. On the longest day of the year (June 21 or 22) the sun rises in the latitude of Pittsburgh at 4:51 A.M., eastern time, and sets at 7:51 P.M. On that day three Roman “hours” after sunrise (counting an “hour” as one-twelfth of daylight) is 8:36 A.M. by our time. On the shortest day of the year (December 21 or 22) the sun rises in the latitude of Pittsburgh at 7:41 A.M. and sets at 4:55 P.M. Three Roman “hours” after sunrise is 9:59 A.M. Thus, on June 21 at the end of the third hour, one hour and twenty-three minutes of daylight would be saved in Pittsburgh as compared with December 21. The amount of daylight saved would vary of course with the time of day that an appointment was made. In the afternoon they evened up matters by scheduling for the eighth “hour” in summer what would be put at the ninth “hour” in winter. We see too that this system had another advantage, one which the modern daylight-saving proposition cannot offer. It is as if we were to set the clocks ahead a different number of minutes every day during the summer, instead of a fixed sixty minutes. This is of course impossible.

Besides, the Romans were very early risers. A schoolboy was often on his way to school, munching his breakfast roll by the light of a lantern, before sunrise. Many men got up to start the day's work in the middle of the night. The result was that the Romans accomplished a great deal of work in a long morning, leaving the afternoon for recreation, exercise, and care of the health. This was true at least in the case of the leading men and was no doubt a factor in the wonderful efficiency in organization and administration exhibited by them. In the afternoon the prominent men of that day invariably took exercise for their health. They usually played ball—often a kind of tennis. We hear of one man who walked four miles and played a long vigorous game of ball every day at the age of seventy-seven. This exercise was followed by hot-air and warm-water baths, a cold plunge, and a good rub-down. Then toward the end of the afternoon they were ready for a good dinner seasoned with intelligent conversation about the great things of life.